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AUTHOR Sigmon, Scott B.
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ABSTRACT

The article traces the development of the concept of learning disabilities (LD) in American education from a sociohistorical perspective, prompting a variety of observations and conclusions. The scientific basis for the conceptualization of the LD clinical syndrome is weak. A clinically identified dysfunctional learning style has been transformed into an educational arrangement. While special education's proper focus is on the moderately and severely handicapped, special education categories and services have been inappropriately expanded to include large numbers of low achieving students labeled as mildly handicapped. Different funding methods must be promulgated for remedial programs to keep students with mild handicaps out of the special education system. The newer LD practice model, developed by LD research institutes and applying a rigorous methodology, should be employed to help educate all students better without first labeling them. (JW)

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American Sociohistorical Roots of Learning Disabilities:

A Foundation For Radical Analysis

Scott B. Sigmon

Irvington, NJ, Public Schools, USA 07111

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Abstract

Through the recently evolved framework of radical educational theory, the linkages between learning disabilities (LD) and culture are examined. (Radical means roots or basic elements.) The place of LD within American special education is discussed. Major concerns are that: (a) a clinically identified dysfunctional learning style has been transformed into an educational arrangement, (b) the scientific basis for the conceptualization of the LD clinical syndrome is weak, and (c) nevertheless, 1 3/4-million American students are labeled LD and the number is growing. Culture attempts to conserve its institutions while faced with large numbers of low achieving students which has resulted in the inappropriate expansion of special education to include the so-called mildly handicapped along with the concomitant creation of new special educational tracks. The newer LD practice model, with its sophisticated and effective teaching techniques, should be employed to help educate all students better without first labeling them.

American Sociohistorical Roots of Learning Disabilities:

A Foundation For Radical Analysis

Overview

This piece takes an approach not generally found in orthodox social science or conservative special education journals. The qualitative method used here is more akin to and commonly found within the fields of the "new" sociology of education (Giroux, 1983; Sarup, 1978; Young, 1971) or radical philosophy of education (Giarelli, 1984; Harris, 1979). There does appear, however, to be in special education a movement toward a rigorous qualitative paradigm (Stainback & Stainback, 1984), or to make the qualitative paradigm more "scientific" via "meta-analysis" (Miller, 1984). Both new sociology and radical philosophy of education have evolved more or less over the past fifteen years, and for further clarification, both of these disciplines are in many American universities located within departments commonly known as "foundations of education."

After more brief discussion about method, the contribution that the social and philosophical foundations of education literature can make toward understanding learning disabilities (LD) will be demonstrated. It will also be shown that with a foundations perspective, we can more easily conceptualize the LD field historical-; and having gained fresh insights by doing this, hopefully, chart a more sensible future course for special education in a free society.

A radical educational analysis focuses on the underlying elements

of educational processes in relation to culture. Contemporary radical writers use a conflict theory framework. Of this genre is "radical socioeducational analysis" (RSA), but it places a very heavy emphasis on the historical development of educational arrangements and their social ramifications. The germinal notion of RSA was developed earlier as a way of looking at social problems and research in American education in general from a different perspective (Sigmon, 1985a). This piece is transitional in nature and provides a foundation for future radical analyses of American special education.

There has really been very little deliberate radical analysis of special education done to date although much recent work, generally that which is critical of some aspect of special education, has alluded to it. There is obviously a void in the USA that should be filled with this type of scholarship which could help advance the field of special education proactively. Too much about special education has been accepted dogmatically by school practitioners and even teacher-educators. The field has generally been changed by two paths: internally, when its prominent figures raised serious questions or suggested novel approaches, and externally, by legislation which had its impetus via litigation (Sigmon, 1983). It is thought the external avenue least desirable for any professional field, and therefore should be avoided if possible through sensible internally articulated direction.

Development Of The LD Concept

Within The Context Of American Education

It was really the "child study" movement started by G. Stanley Hall (1883, 1900, 1901-2), around the turn of this century which produced in America the mental set whereby "the content of the curriculum could

itself be determined from the data of child development" (Crémin, 1961, pp. 102-103). What this meant, and it was monumental, was that psychology, child development, and individual differences were to be greatly considered when schooling youngsters. Hall provided a "scientific" basis for separate, special education in the schools. Special classes were widely established nationally in America between 1915 and 1930. Aside from youngsters with severe sensory and physical disabilities, there was a larger group who were much slower in learning the expected schoolwork in their graded classes. Many from this latter group were placed in educable mentally retarded (EMR) classes—even though a sizable number were more handicapped by culture, especially language, than intellectual deficits. (It is important to note that there was no formal category for the mildly retarded person before the advent of various grade levels.) Additionally, "remedial reading" first appeared in the 1920s (Smith, 1961) and study on the "slow learner" commenced in the mid-1930s (Ingram, 1935/1960). There was, however, from 1930 to 1940 "a halt and even a decline" to the special class trend related to the economics of the great Depression (Robinson & Robinson, 1965, p. 40). The slow learner notion—although greatly forgotten and ignored, is still taught to graduate special education students—maintained and built momentum into the 1960s (Johnson, 1963; Kephart, 1960; Younie, 1967). The slow learner, a vague term with various parameters, can be consensually defined as being a student who is not retarded but achieves below the 50%ile—although achievement is usually quite lower and IQ can be as low as borderline retarded. A major contention of this piece is that those topics found within this paragraph set the stage for the institutionalization of LD as a separate

educational track. What remains to be shown are: (1) the scientific development of a disabled learning style (LD), (2) how the notion of this style became perverted to represent a particular homogeneous group rather than a heterogeneous cross section having this disabled learning style, and (3) the current rampant labeling of students as LD and the significance of this excessive practice.

Shortly after World War I in Germany the neurologist Kurt Goldstein studied the aftereffects of brain injuries sustained by German soldiers. They were characterized as having difficulty with abstractions and being stimulus bound, incapable of differentiating between figure and ground, prone to catastrophic reactions, perseverative, meticulous, and orderly (Ross, 1977). While still in Germany, the young Alfred A. Strauss (M.D., 1897-1957), a neuropsychiatrist, studied under Goldstein. After having emigrated to the USA, Strauss was teamed up with another young German emigre, Heinz Werner (Ph.D., 1890-1964), an already noted developmental psychologist, at the Wayne County Training School in Northville, Michigan, in 1937. This was a progressive residential school for educable mentally retarded students which, under very enlightened leadership and a generous budget, also conducted research of high caliber and trained graduate psychology students from the University of Michigan (William M. Cruickshank, personal communication, March 8, 1984). Strauss, while at the training school which served Detroit and no longer exists, was known as an "idea man" (Cruickshank, personal communication, March 15, 1984). In the late 1930s, Strauss (1938) had become seriously interested in "exogenous factors" as causative to "mental deficiency" in children, and this later led to the establishment of two distinct categories of retardation: retardation as a result of "brain damage"

(the "exogenous type") and that without brain insult (familial retardation or the "endogenous type") (Martinson & Strauss, 1940). And so the connection to the earlier war victims: "Goldstein and Gelb have described a disturbance in the differentiation of figure and background in brain-injured adult patients. We have attempted, in various experimental situations, to demonstrate the presence of this disturbance in brain-injured children" (Werner & Strauss, 1940, p. 440). Although new work by Werner and Strauss continued to be published into the 1950s, and 1960s, their major contributions to special education were really highlighted in the classic book entitled Psychopathology and education of the brain-injured child (Strauss & Lehtinen, 1947), and which was later followed by a second volume (Strauss & Kephart, 1955).

At this point a major concern regarding LD's genesis will be pointed out. Werner and Strauss took a giant conceptual leap which is logically flawed.

Adults who are presumed to have been normal prior to their brain injury seem to have trouble with figure-ground perception. It does not necessarily follow from this that retarded children who have trouble with figure-ground perception owe their retardation to brain damage. In the absence of an independent indication of brain damage it is fallacious to identify a child as brain injured merely on the basis of the observation that his behavior on a psychological test is similar to behavior manifested by brain-injured adults. A previously intact adult brain that has been damaged is very likely to function differently from the developing brain of a child. Even if the child's brain has sustained some damage, it is quite unlike that inflicted by the devastation wrought by a piece of shrapnel. That neither the adult war casualty nor the mentally retarded child can tell us very much about a normal child who is learning disabled would nowadays appear obvious. (Ross, 1977, p. 20)

Now we can see that the reasoning behind what was to later become LD is on unsteady scientific ground.

The demographics of the 1950s and early 1960s presented a unique set of circumstances. The baby-boom following World War II was in full swing. As a result, parents' groups had become large plus influential, and were demanding much from education—including special facilities for their handicapped children and special classes were again promoted enthusiastically (Robinson & Robinson, 1965). This was to become an extremely productive professional period in special education with a concomitant receptive public. The year 1957 marked the beginning of U. S. federal financial support for special education whereupon \$667,000 was earmarked for the education of the retarded (Public Law 85-531 "Cooperative research act").

Samuel A. Kirk, although stating "I did not originate the term 'specific learning disabilities' " (Kirk, 1976, p. 257), was the first known writer to use the terms "specific learning disability" in a book (Kirk, 1962) and "learning disabilities" in a journal article (Kirk & Bateman, 1962). It is one of the major ironies of the special education literature that the Kirk and Bateman (1962) article appeared in the same issue of Exceptional Children—a leading, early special education journal still published—with one by Johnson (1962). Johnson's piece, indeed not the first to point out the inadequacies of special EMR classes for their students (Blatt, 1960, was earlier), made the strongest case to date against them. Johnson (1962) concluded that with mildly retarded youngsters whose average IQ was 65, "The reported research to date does not support the subjective evaluations of teachers and their contention that the education for mentally handicapped children in special classes is superior to that provided these children in regular classes" (pp. 66-67). It is even more ironic that in the first LD article (Kirk &

Bateman, 1962), even though "training programs" and "remedial procedures" are discussed, special classes for the learning disabled are not. You, the reader, decide what was meant by training programs.

Kirk (1976) suggested the term LD in 1963 to a parents' group who welcomed it and which would later become known as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (or ACLD). LD is obviously a much more palatable term than brain damaged, brain injured, or other phrases of that ilk, and is more educationally relevant. Kirk's intimate involvement with the field of LD is substantial in many ways—through organizations, with the federal government, academically and through research and tests. It is sufficient to say that Kirk is, more than anyone else, most responsible for the establishment of the notion of LD; and interestingly, Kirk worked at the Wayne County school while a doctoral student, between 1931 and 1935, prior to the arrival in 1937 of both Strauss and Werner.

When Kirk was a professor at the University of Illinois he was the mentor for a dissertation which produced a test on psycholinguistic growth in preschool children (Sievers, 1955/1956). Not long afterwards, he became a primary developer of a psycholinguistic test for school age children (ITPA) (Kirk & McCarthy, 1961). This test was for years afterwards used, in revised form, by learning disabilities specialists to diagnose LD and recommend remedial techniques. The ITPA within the very recent past few years has fallen out of grace because of serious questions about its validity, and is generally now only used by the earliest LD specialists.

Kirk's original LD definition and that used today by the federal government (in Public Law 94-142 of 1975; and Education of Handicapped,

1977, following) are quite similar, except that the former's is more broad and inclusive in scope.

A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, spelling, writing, or arithmetic resulting from a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbance and not from mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural or instructional factors. (Kirk, 1962, p. 263, all italicized in original)

The above meaning—although obviously influenced by Werner and Strauss, i.e., cerebral dysfunction—effectively changed the notion of a defective learning style to a category by ruling out mental retardation (MR), blindness and/or deafness, cultural factors, and previous poor instruction. Kirk's exclusion of MR in his original formal LD statement may be in part due to his association with parents' groups which were forerunners of eventual LD organizations.

In Kirk's (1962) lengthy textbook, his section on "Learning Disabilities" comprised less than twelve full pages, but it had only slightly more than two pages covering an explicit discussion of LD, all of which was found at the end of chapter ten (of fourteen) entitled "Cerebral palsy and associated disorders." The federal government's definition offers further refinement by eliminating behavioral or emotional disturbance (ED) and makes LD one or more faulty "psychological" processes. Therefore, through federal statutory law, legitimacy was given to the newest distinctive disability category by which children could be formally classified through inferential psychological tests. The full federal definition is below.

"Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes

such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage. (Education of Handicapped, 1977, p. 42478)

Cruickshank (1976) explains well the transformation and problem with LD as a category: "While the research of the 1930s and 1940s had essentially been focused on mental retardation, we were trying to ascertain whether the observed characteristics with that early group also pertain to the intellectually normal" (p. 105). Cruickshank (personal communication, March 15, 1984) knows this from first hand experience as he too was at the Wayne County Training School, but after Kirk left. In the long passage below, turning again to Cruickshank (1976), the perverting of LD—as a dysfunctional learning style, studied by research-educators, to help teachers instruct children—to an artificial category which has led to unnecessary stigmatization and segregation is cogently explained.

Without anticipating the problems to ensue, a line of demarcation was drawn between mental retardation and learning disabilities - a horizontal line separating the two groups at approximately an intellectual level of I.Q. 80. National, state, and local definitions of learning disability reflect this error. In reality the line should be drawn vertically, if indeed there should be a line at all. Essentially what we know about learning disabilities of a perceptual nature in intellectually normal children is based upon the research done with exogenous mentally retarded children. Learning disabilities are characteristic of children and youth of any chronological age and of any and all intellectual levels. The artifact of differentiation between the two clinical groups is just that, a recent man-made artifact. It is illogical. . . . the exclusion of the perceptually handicapped mentally retarded child from the specialized teaching and learning situations which are germane to his peculiar learning needs is an unnecessary tragedy, and the situation must be rectified quickly. That professionals permitted this situation to develop is a sad commentary. (p. 106)

Conclusions

It is believed here that children with congenital or traumatic postnatal neurological disorganization—having Strauss and Werner's "endogenous" syndrome, later to be named "LD" by Kirk—may warrant self-contained special placement. The problem arises, however, when children with alleged mild LD must be labeled and/or placed in special education before they are provided additional academic support, and therefore different funding methods must be promulgated for remedial programs to keep pupils with "mild handicaps" out of the special education system (Sigmon, 1984). Special education's true mission is to educate the moderately and severely handicapped, but this has been forgotten. Because of this, special education has been made a scapegoat and has become subliminally politicized (Shapiro, 1980; Sigmon, 1985b; Tomlinson, 1982).

Two highly essential points have emerged from the five university affiliated LD research institutes sponsored for four years by the U. S. federal government (through Title VI-G of Public Law 91-230, "Special programs for children with specific learning disabilities" of 1970) which began operations in 1977 or 1978 (Kneedler & Hallahan, 1983). The work at the institute in Minnesota, which focused on LD classification decision making by school officials, reached the conclusion that it is very difficult to distinguish between children who actually may have mild LD and those who are simply underachievers (Epps, McGue, & Ysseldyke, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982). The other four LD research institutes, for the most part, developed sophisticated teaching methods which were highly effective with LD students of all ages. (These latter institutes were aware that not all

LD-labeled students were physiologically handicapped.) In essence, the four found that all LD students do learn, and such students learn but with careful and rigorous teaching methodology.

It is the position of this paper and probably that of most all the higher education-scholarly community, that the gains made by the research-educators on the study of dysfunctional learning styles (LD)—regardless of the LD genesis—and their concomitant advances in teaching techniques have not, by and large, been put into practice in the public schools (Steven A. Carlson, personal communication, June 28, 1984). Furthermore, it is not believed here that a great many special educational programs for the LD employ the sophisticated techniques developed by the four LD research institutes, and many special educators at all levels are unaware of them. These techniques (which involve communication skills, the learning process, and academic strategies) will not be described here because a discussion of teaching methodology is not the intent of this work (for this see Carnine, 1979; Englemann, 1969; Kneedler & Hallahan, 1983). Rather, the purpose here is to articulate the problem which is that LD, an inherently good notion, is being abused and is used, for the most part, to gain monies to pay for educational tracks for those students who do not conform to the regular education programs—and who do not fit other special education labels. LD is a classification of and by default.

Policy and practice regarding LD should be changed, and as soon as possible. We must rapidly move away from the LD clinical classification to the newer LD "practice model" to produce more effective teaching (Carlson, personal communication, June 28, 1984). The newer, successful teaching techniques typified by the LD institutes should be employed

with all students. Good students would be better, and so would the others. School districts should not have to classify students to get funding. The LD question is a societal problem, not an intrapsychic individual student problem. There would be fewer underachievers in society if less poverty existed in the cities and suburban schools were more humane. The LD clinical model now used serves only to stigmatize and segregate, inappropriately and unconscionably, most of the approximately 1 3/4-million American school children currently labeled LD (the number is from United States Office of Special Education, 1984). Two real anecdotes below are quite telling. It recently was heard from a newly graduated urban high school student—who was considered by local school officials to be "only very mildly LD": "I was in a special class. My grandmother thinks I was there because I'm retarded. That's not the reason. You see, I'm only brain damaged." And, during an interpretation conference with the parent of a suburban child, in mid-third grade, whose main problem was a 2.8 grade level score on a reading achievement test and was occasionally not efficient with individual seat-work, the school official said: "The neurologist did not find any real brain injury, but soft signs suggest the existence of a learning disability. So we would like to place your child in a special education resource room for two periods every day." It is hoped that these sorts of experiences will become part of history, never to be repeated.

The basis for the scientific evidence for classifying what will soon be two million American students as LD is questionable and so are the tests used to identify such (Coles, 1978). There is, however, no doubt that many children do not learn very well or very much in most of today's regular classes. Some children may have LD caused by actual,

severe neurological disorganization and would benefit from a special class. However, with the great majority of children classified LD, it is clear that these children are classified by local school districts merely to receive funding. There are many students today in the public schools, labeled LD or not, who are resisters (Linda Gonzalves, personal communication, April 3, 1984). The field of LD must be viewed separately from school politics, and must adopt the newer practice model to educate students who have difficulty with school subjects rather than to become further co-opted as a means of segregating students who are slower to grasp or resist conventional schooling.

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